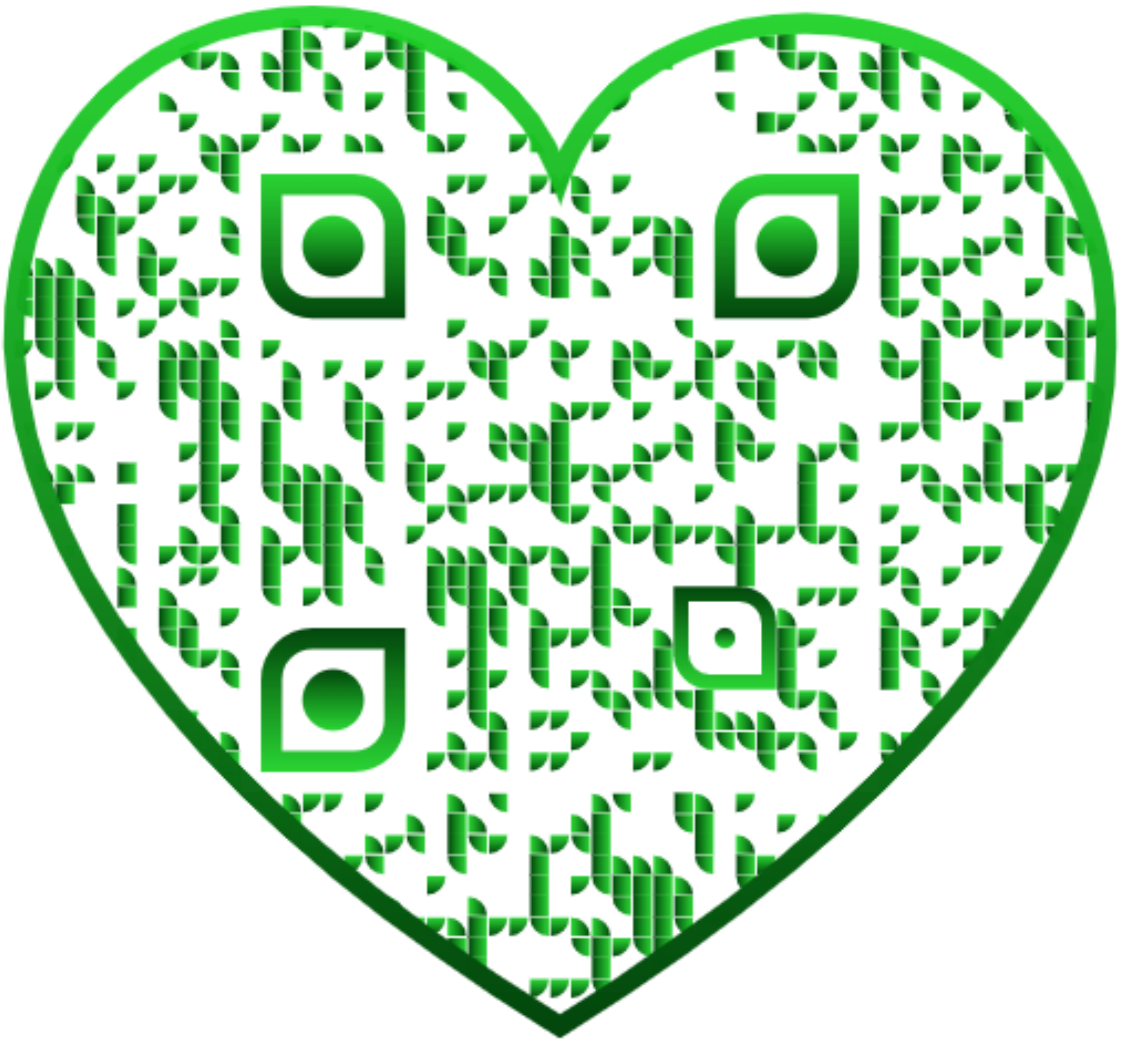
SENECA

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

SPECIAL EDITION WITH PREFACE BY
LÚCIA HELENA GALVÃO MAYA

Camelot
EDITORA



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It is not that we have a short time
to live, but that we waste a lot of it.
Life is long enough, and a sufficiently
generous amount has been
given to us for the highest achievements
if the time was all well invested. But
when it is wasted in luxury and
carelessness, when it is not devoted to
good ends, finally forced by ultimate
necessity, we realize that it passed
before we knew it was passing.

Seneca

Preface

orn in Cordoba in 4 BC and dying in Rome in 65 AD, Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a Roman philosopher known for his works on moral character belonging to the Stoic school of thought, in which his name shines as one of its greatest exponents. Son of an orator, Marcus Annaeus Seneca, he developed a prosperous political career in which he was quaestor, praetor, senator, and consul in the governments of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero, as well as tutor of Emperor Nero. In total, Seneca met five Roman emperors.

A talented orator, he was an important figure in Roman politics, being one of the most admired, influential, and respected senators. Between the years 54 and 62, during the first years of the reign of his pupil, Nero, Seneca was at the head of the Roman Empire together with Sextus Afranius Burrus, which made him acquire numerous enemies, and he ended up being forced to withdraw from politics in 62 AD. Falsely accused of having participated in Piso's conspiracy against Nero, the latter sentenced him to death, and the philosopher was forced to commit suicide in 65 AD.

Seneca's work is vast and taken as an important source of Stoic philosophy, in which he gained prominence, later accompanied by Epictetus, the slave, and Marcus Aurelius, the emperor, two other great Stoic thinkers.

The influence of his teachings extends throughout

history to the present day, being of special importance during the Renaissance, in which he was taken as an example of moral virtues to be implemented and practiced.

In our historical moment, Stoicism, with its rigorous morality, its teaching transmitted not only in words but above all by example, its sobriety and serenity in the face of facts that come from the outside world, its observation, trust, and purpose of alignment with the laws that emanate from nature, seems to us to be a precious medicine against the ills of a society where values no longer occupy the main scene but personal interests do, with its range of tricks and subterfuges to justify the unjustifiable and make its own advantage prevail at any cost.

Stoic teachings, in this context, shine for their wisdom and simplicity, and inspire hopes of a moral recovery through their distant example, since everything that is close to us, historically speaking, was covered by a taint of discredit. Today, maybe more than before, we need these ancient and worthy Roman men to, with their firm and sure voices, bring back our faith in ourselves and in humanity as a whole.

The moral reconstruction of our civilization, with its purposes and meanings, is perceived as becoming more urgent every day. We all fear the next steps to be taken due to our turbulent recent history, and we look for hope. And, in this context, Stoicism is once again the topic of the day in increasingly frequent conversations.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SENECA

Compared to the work of the other two philosophers of Roman Stoicism that were mentioned, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, the work of Seneca that reaches our days is vast and consists of moral dialogues, letters, tragedies, and epigrams

(brief poetic compositions that are inscribed on monuments or tombs).

Among these works, maybe the one that has had the greatest reach and that most enjoys the reader's sympathy is this dialogue: On the Shortness of Life, which addresses the bad habits that make us waste time without paying attention to the fact that time is synonymous with life and without giving this same life a greater meaning that justifies it in the category of human life. It is about reflections, and practical and incisive advice.

Anyone who works with time management techniques, which are so necessary to impose a basic organization to our duties and needs, knows how to recognize the value of Seneca's advice in this classic work, as a backbone of findings and guidance on how to take command of our time and give it a fair use and direction. Everything else, in general, can be unfolded from this fundamental advice.

Some important ideas to highlight in this work would be:

1. **Life is not short, but poorly used.**

   A well-known philosophical maxim already said that the length of a single life would be enough for us to start from absolute ignorance and reach the maximum wisdom that can be achieved by a human being if we had years of 365 days, days of 24 hours, and hours of 60 minutes. How many minutes are there in our hours? How many days are there in our lives? Memory, selective and objective in its criteria, only retains what was lived with "body and mind together," that is, the moments when consciousness was awake, focused, and willing to learn. If these moments gradually grow, we will be beginning a process of taking ownership of

our lives, lengthening and giving meaning to our time, and filling empty spaces with light. It is impossible to calculate the size of the "lengthening" potential of our time that this posture can generate.

Just as a lover perceives how long and time-consuming its minutes of waiting are and makes the time spent with its beloved fly by, consciousness, focused and endowed with purpose, aligns and lengthens its days as if these were solid steps toward its most valid human goals and its most transcendent dreams. Definitely, clocks lie: time is not measured in such an objective way.

2. We must avoid wasting time on inertia and addictions.

The one who loves what it does and wants to bring it to a successful conclusion, that is, the one who has a spirit of mission permeating its activities, will not harbor the so-called "time thieves" in its home, which are those that intend to make it impossible to achieve its dreams.

No one imagines a great artist, like the iconic Leonardo da Vinci, overcome by laziness that prevents him from launching into the mystery revealed through his paintings. He also longed to know, to bring this mystery to light, and his spirit did not stop even when faced with the most basic needs of the body on several occasions, such as food and sleep.

Nor can one imagine the Renaissance genius feeding any type of addiction as an escape route from a life that was insipid and difficult to bear. Each day is an important part of a journey; it is a part of a path directed towards your achievements, and this path is exciting and challenging; there is no reason to run away from it.

In short, the reiterative guidelines of our philosopher in relation to this could themselves be summarized in an epigram: "If you love your life, lock your door tightly so that no illusion steals any chapter of it from you!"

3. The one who has no fixed objective lives at the mercy of the tides.

Imagine a castaway ship on the high seas: its direction and destiny do not belong to it but to the whim of the tides, which throw it randomly from one side to the other.

But if, by some unusual intervention, the end of a rope is placed in someone's hands and it is made to know that the other end is firmly tied to the solid ground, it is no longer a plaything in the hands of circumstances, although their feet are not on solid ground either. It has a path to solid ground; all it has to do is not let go of this rope and pull it a little every day, without rushing or pausing.

In this way, each day will bring a huge gain: a few meters of sea were left behind, and the proximity to land is a little greater... Who knows if, after the morning's effort, it may be possible to see the beach?

This goal, this clear and well-defined direction, rescues it from the slavery of the tides and makes it free to give meaning and value to each of its days and to each of its efforts. So, it is with the human meaning of life, its human purpose of fulfillment: firmly linked to it, every movement of this man's hands is a little of the future that has already been conquered, that has already been brought to the present; no time is wasted.

4. Whoever gave you a moment of attention is better

than you, who never gives the same attention to yourself.

Try asking yourself what moment of your day made you happiest. Maybe the observation/answer will surprise you showing a simple moment, in contact with nature instead of the noisy moment in which you followed the script of a social event that does not bring you any satisfaction.

The curious thing is that, without this provocative question and the subsequent pause for reflection, you could go a lifetime without realizing this fact. Why do you not see things that are so obvious and relevant? You do not have time to get to know yourself, to see who you are and where you want to go with everything you do, think, and seek.

In short, there is not enough time to discover and build your own identity. Is this not a necessary operation, or is it not worthy of priority in your life? And what are your life priorities? The man who believes that there are more important things than that, which is the lever on which all decisions and directions taken from now on will be based, or he is a man who dedicates his time to serving the table of the gods on Olympus... Or he is a fool who does not know how to prioritize his tasks. We must expose this disjunctive to our consciousness and wait for it to take a position in relation to the changes that must be implemented.

5. Do you seek out others just to escape from yourself?

Coexistence, collaboration, union – these are all very worthy and necessary goals. However, is it possible to be deeply with others if we are not with ourselves? If we are superficial in our self-knowledge; will we know others in depth? Will we establish solid and true bonds with them? In general, logically, we can state that superficiality

only generates superficiality. The time dedicated to getting to know oneself, polishing the edges that need to be polished, and developing the virtues that emerge is also a time dedicated to others, to the whole. These are interconnected tasks; the right amount of time dedicated to one of them paves the way for us to quickly reach the other. It is a double win.

6. Why do you defend your patrimony, but give your time easily?

Is not time our most precious patrimony since it contains our lives? Does the time before us need to be scarce for us to learn how to value it?

We zealously guard our properties, but we carelessly give our time to those who would take it from us. The time of a banal and fruitless conversation added to the time of empty or even harmful entertainment added to the time of... How much have we wasted? But if someone tells you: take this book, which is full of wise recommendations, and reflect on it... Our time becomes scarce: "When I can, I will certainly do it!" However, we never can; there is so much to do!

But when banality knocks on our door, we are prodigal and give our time without measure or moderation. One day, when we look at the past and evaluate the use of our time, what else will we find besides the trail of banality?

7. We reserve for ourselves only the leftovers of life!

It is not uncommon, in our historical situation, to hear the narrative of the man who waits for retirement, for his children to settle down, and things like that to finally

start doing the things that satisfy his human nature. Will it only be on this day and not before that we will dedicate ourselves to studying, reflecting, meditating, and searching for the beauty and meaning of life? The curious thing is that nothing guarantees that we will have enough longevity to reach this day or that, upon reaching it, we will still count on the health, energy, and lucidity necessary to make the most of it.

In the same way that we realize the constant need to feed our body, we should also notice that something in us, often called the "soul" or "human consciousness," also needs its own food and that such a long fast could kill it by starvation.

All human beings die, but not all live... Some simply survive. And the time dedicated to ethics, aesthetics, mysticism, and reflection, and assimilation of all the content they offer? If there is time, I will do it. What if there is no time left? Will we die in peace because we did everything that was "important"? Was it not important to build ourselves as human beings and, through our example, pave a path for others? Unfortunately, it seems not.

Maybe it is true, after all, what Carl Gustav Jung, the famous founder of Analytical Psychology, said: "The man of the 20th century, who talks so much about economics, is, in fact, a waster; he wastes the most precious thing: the Spirit."

Of maxims like these and many others of the same nature and importance is composed On the Shortness of Life. Invaluable advice for those who have enough time to listen and practice it.

These maxims reverberate in many other thinkers and

traditions that, according to their particular time, space, and system of ideas, state the same inestimable value of life and the necessary wisdom not to spend it in vain. May Seneca's voice find an echo in our days and rescue a little of that human life that drains and is lost in a senseless way, while human needs are so many and so urgent.

Lúcia Helena Galvão Maya
Speaker, philosophy teacher, writer, screenwriter, and poet

This is how it is: the life we receive is not short, but we make it so; we do not have it to spare either, but we waste it. Just as great and princely wealth is dissipated when it comes into the hands of a bad owner, while wealth, though limited, if entrusted to a good guardian, increases with use, so our life is long enough for the one who orders it correctly.

I

THE MAJORITY OF MORTALS, Paulinus[1], complain about the evilness of nature because we are born with the prospect of a brief span of life, because even the time that was granted to us passes so quickly that, except for a very few, we find the end of life just when we are getting ready to live. Nor it is only the common mortals or the ignorant multitude that consider this a universal evil; the same feeling also raised complaints from famous men. It was this that made the greatest of physicians exclaim that "life is short, art is long;"[2] this is what led Aristotle[3], while protesting against nature, to make a very inappropriate accusation for a wise man, stating that, in terms of age, it has shown such favor to animals allowing them to contemplate five or ten generations[4], however, it establishes a much shorter limit to man, even though he was born for so

[1] It is clear from chapters 18 and 19 that when this essay was written (around 49 AD), Paulinus was praefectus annonae, the official who supervised the grain supply of Rome, and was, therefore, an important man. He was, credibly, a close relative of Seneca's wife, Pompeia Paulina, and is generally identified as the father of a certain Pompeius Paulinus, who held high public positions under Nero (Pliny, Nat. Hist. xxxiii. 143; Tacitus, Annals, xiii. 53.2; xv).

[2] The famous aphorism of Hippocrates of Cos.

[3] An error for Theophrastus, as shown by Cicero, Tusc. Disp. iii. 69: "Theophrastus autem moriens accusasse naturam dicitur, quod cervis et cornicibus vitam diuturnam, quorum id nihil interesset, hominibus, quorum maxime interfuisset, tam exiguam vitam dedisset; quorum si aetas potuisset esse longinquior, futurum fuisse ut omnibus perfectis artibus omni doctrina hominum vita erudiretur" ("But Theophrastus, on his deathbed, would have accused nature, because it gave so little life to the deer and ravens, of which it made no difference; if their age could have been greater, there would have been").

[4] That is, of men. Cf. Hesiod, Frag. 183 (Rzach).

many great achievements. It is not that we have a short span of time to live, but that we waste too much of it. Life is long enough and has been given in sufficiently generous measure to allow the achievement of greater things if the time is well invested. But when it is wasted in luxury and carelessness, when it is not dedicated to good ends, finally forced by ultimate necessity, we realize that it passed before we knew it was passing. This is how it is: the life we receive is not short, but we make it so; we do not have it to spare either, but we waste it. Just as great and princely wealth is dissipated when it comes into the hands of a bad owner, while wealth, though limited, if entrusted to a good guardian, increases with use, so our life is long enough for the one who orders it correctly.

Addictions surround us – and surround us on all sides – and do not allow us to rise again and raise our eyes to discern the truth, but they keep us down while they dominate us and chain us to lust. Their victims are never allowed to return to their true selves; if they ever had the chance to find some relief, but, like the waters at the bottom of the sea that continue to heave even after the storm has passed, they are tossed from side to side and no rest from their lusts remains.

II

WHY DO WE COMPLAIN ABOUT NATURE? It has shown itself kindly. Life, if you know how use it, is long. But a certain man is possessed by insatiable avarice; another, by a laborious devotion to useless tasks; one is obsessed with wine; another, paralyzed by laziness; a certain man is exhausted, because achieving his ambition depends on the decisions of others; another, driven by the greed of the trader, is led to all lands and all seas by the hope of gain; some are tormented by a passion for war and are always engaged in inflicting dangers on others or concerned about their own; there are those who were exhausted by voluntary servitude to the powerful; many are kept busy either envying other men's fortune or complaining about their own; many, without following a fixed objective, unstable and dissatisfied, are involved by their inconstancy, always developing new plans; some have no fixed principle by which to direct their course, and fate takes them by surprise as they relax and yawn – this happens so certainly that I cannot doubt the truth of that statement which the greatest of poets uttered like an oracle: "The part of life we really live is small"[5], for all the rest of existence is not life, but just time. Addictions surround us –

[5] A prose rendering of an unknown poet.

and surround us on all sides – and do not allow us to rise again and raise our eyes to discern the truth, but they keep us down while they dominate us and chain us to lust. Their victims are never allowed to return to their true selves; if they ever had the chance to find some relief, but, like the waters at the bottom of the sea that continue to heave even after the storm has passed, they are tossed from side to side and no rest from their lusts remains. Do you think I am talking about those wretches whose evils are visible? Look at those whose prosperity men flock to behold: they are smothered by their blessings. For how many are riches a burden? From how many do eloquence and daily efforts to display their powers draw their blood? How many are pale with weakness because of constant pleasures? How many lose their freedom to the crowd of clients[6] around them? In short, go through the list of all these men, from the lowest to the highest – this man wants a lawyer[7], this one answers to the call, that one is on trial, this one defends him, another one gives the sentence. Nobody takes care of itself; everyone is lost because of the other. Ask about the men whose names are known by heart and you will see that these are marks that distinguish them: this takes care of that one, who takes care of another; no one is its own master. And then certain men show the most senseless indignation – complain of the insolence of their superiors, because they were too busy to see them when they wanted an audience! But can someone have the intrepidity to complain about the pride of another when he does not have

[6] Contrary to the current sense, in Ancient Rome, a client (from the Latin cliens) was a commoner associated with a benefactor patron. Clients owed respect to their patrons, as their patrons reciprocally owed them protection.

[7] Not the one who undertook the defense itself, but the one who, with its presence and advice, provided support in court.

time to take care of himself? After all, no matter who you are, the great man sometimes looks at you even if his face is insolent; he sometimes condescends to listen to your words and allows you to appear at his side. However, you never deign to look at yourself, to listen to yourself. There is no reason, therefore, to charge anyone for such services, since when you performed them you wanted the company of another, but could not bear your own.

You live as if you are destined to live forever, no thoughts about your fragility enter your head, [you live] without paying attention to how much time has passed. You waste time as if you had a full and abundant supply of it, although the day you give to some person or thing may be your last. You have all the fears of mortals and all the desires of immortals. You will hear many men saying, "After my fiftieth year, I will retire to leisure; my sixtieth year will free me from public duties." And what guarantee do you have that your life will last longer?

III

ll brilliant intellects of all times never cease to be amazed at the dense darkness of the human mind. Men do not allow anyone to take possession of their properties and run to pick up stones and weapons if there is the slightest dispute over the boundaries of their lands, but they allow others to invade their lives – in fact, they themselves invite invaders. No one is willing to share its wealth, but each of us shares our lives among many! In guarding their fortunes, men often have their fists clenched, but when it is about wasting time, – the one thing we should be stingy about – they are very prodigal. I would like to question any of the older men: "I see that you have reached the furthest limit of human life; you are approaching your hundredth year, or are even beyond it; come now, remember your life, and make a reckoning. Consider how much of your time was spent with a creditor, how much with a mistress, how much with a patron, how much with a client, how much in disputes with your wife, how much in punishing your slaves, and how much in running around the city fulfilling social duties. Count the diseases we cause ourselves by our own actions; also add the time that was idle and unproductive, and you will see that you have fewer years than you count. Check your memory and consider when you had a goal, how many days passed as you intended, when you had time for yourself, when your face had its natural expression, when your mind was not disturbed, how much work you did in

life so long, how many stole your life when you did not even know you were losing it, how much was occupied by useless sadness, by foolish joy, by greedy desire, by the seductions of society, and how little of yourself was left for you. You will then realize that you are dying before your time!"[8] What, then, is the reason for this? You live as if you are destined to live forever, no thoughts about your fragility enter your head, you live without paying attention to how much time has passed. You waste time as if you had a full and abundant supply of it, although the day you give to some person or thing may be your last. You have all the fears of mortals and all the desires of immortals. You will hear many men saying, "After my fiftieth year, I will retire to leisure; my sixtieth year will free me from public duties." And what guarantee do you have that your life will last longer? What will allow your course to be exactly as you planned it? Are you not ashamed to reserve for yourself only the end of life and to set aside only the unproductive age for wisdom? It is too late to start living precisely when we should stop living! What foolish forgetfulness of mortals to postpone beneficial plans until the fiftieth or sixtieth year, and to intend to begin life from a point to which few have reached!

[8] Literally, "unripe." At 100 years old, he must "come to the grave in full age, as an ear of corn comes in its season" (Job v. 26); but he is still unripe.

Even the deified Augustus, to whom the gods granted more than to any other man, did not cease to pray for rest and to seek release from public affairs. All his conversations always returned to this subject – his hope for leisure. This was the sweet, even if vain, consolation with which he rejoiced in his work – that one day he would live for himself.

IV

YOU WILL SEE THAT THE MOST powerful and well-placed men make comments in which they demonstrate they long for leisure, acclaiming it and preferring it to all blessings. They sometimes wish, if it could be with safety, to descend from their high pinnacle, for, although nothing that comes from outside threatens or shakes them, fortune collapses under its own weight[9].

Even the deified Augustus[10], to whom the gods granted more than to any other man, did not cease to pray for rest and to seek release from public affairs. All his conversations always returned to this subject – his hope for leisure. This was the sweet, even if vain, consolation with which he rejoiced in his work – that one day he would live for himself. In a letter addressed to the senate, in which he promised that his rest would not be destitute of dignity nor inconsistent with his former glory, I find these words: "But such matters can be better demonstrated by acts than by promises. However, since the joyful reality is still far distant, my desire for that time, for which I pray so fervently, led me to precede something of its delight by the pleasure of words." Leisure was something so desired that he anticipated it in thought because he could not actually experience it. The one who saw everything depending only on himself, who determined

[9] The idea is that greatness sinks under its own weight. Cf. Seneca, Agamemnon, 88 sq.

[10] Gaius Octavianus, Augustus (63 BC – 14 AD), the first emperor of Rome.

the fate of individuals and nations, thought with great happiness of that future day on which he should set aside his greatness. He had discovered how much sweat these blessings that shone throughout all lands brought to his brow and how many secret worries they hid. Forced to throw weapons first against his countrymen, then against his colleagues, and finally against his relatives, he shed blood on land and sea.

Through Macedonia, Sicily, Egypt, Syria, and Asia, and almost every country, he followed the path of battle, and when his troops were tired of shedding Roman blood, he turned them to foreign wars. While he pacified the Alpine regions and subdued the enemies planted in the midst of a peaceful empire, while he extended his bounds even beyond the Rhine, the Euphrates, and the Danube; in Rome the swords of Murena, Caepio, Lepidus, Egnatius, and others turned against him. He had not yet escaped their plots when his daughter[11] and all the young nobles who were bound to her by adultery as by a sacred oath often alarmed his declining years – and there was also Paulinus, the need to fear a woman in alliance with an Antonius[12]. He cut these ulcers[13] with his own hands, and others appeared in their place; just as in a wounded and bleeding body, there was always a rupture somewhere. And so he longed for leisure, in the hope and thought that he would find relief from his work. This was the prayer of someone who knew how to answer the prayers of mankind.

[11] The notorious Julia, who was banished by Augustus to the island of Pandataria.

[12] In 31 BC, Augustus attacked Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra; in 2 BC, Iullus Antonius was sentenced to death because of his intrigue with Julia, the emperor's eldest daughter.

[13] The language is reminiscent of Augustus' own characterization of Julia and his two grandchildren in Suetonius (Aug. 65. 5): "nec (solebat) aliter eos appellare quam tris vomicas ac tria carcinomata sua" ("his trio of boils and trio of ulcers").

But, in truth, the wise man will never resort to such a humble name; he will never be half a prisoner – he who has always possessed an unaltered and stable freedom, being free and master of himself, towering over all others.

V

Marcus Cicero, having lived a long time among men like Catiline and Clodius, Pompey and Crassus, some declared enemies, others, doubtful friends, while he was tossed from one side to the other along with the state, trying to keep it from destruction until it was finally swept away, unable to have peace in prosperity or serenity in adversity, how many times he cursed his consulship, which he had praised so much, although not without reason! How tearful the words he uses in a letter[14] written to Atticus, when Pompey, the elder, had been defeated, and his son was still trying to restore the weapons that were shattered in Spain! "Do you ask me," he said, "what I am doing here?" He then goes on to make other statements in which he regrets his former life, complains about the present, and despairs about the future. Cicero said he was "half a prisoner." But in truth, the wise man will never resort to such a humble term; he will never be half a prisoner – he who has always possessed an unaltered and stable freedom, being free and master of himself, towering over all others. For what can be superior to that which is above Fortune?

[14] Non-existent.

It would be superfluous to mention those who, although others considered them the happiest among men, expressed their disgust for every act they performed throughout their years and, with their own lips, gave true testimony against themselves. But, with these complaints, they did not change either themselves or others because, while they expressed their feelings in words, passions made them return to their old habits.

VI

When Livius Drusus[15], a bold and energetic man, had, with the support of a great crowd from all over Italy, proposed new laws against the evil measures of the Gracchi, seeing no way out for his policy, which he could neither carry out nor abandon once it had already been released, he bitterly complained about the restless life he had lived since birth and exclaimed that he was the only person who had never had a vacation, even as a child. For, while he was still in custody and wearing the pretext robe[16], he had the courage to recommend the defendants to the jury so vehemently that, in fact, in certain trials, he obtained a favorable verdict. How far would this premature ambition lead? No one could have known that this early greed would result in great personal and public misfortune. And therefore, it was too late to complain that he had never taken a vacation when, since childhood, he had been a troublemaker and a nuisance in the forum. It is debated whether he died by his own hands, as he died from a sudden wound received in the groin. Some doubt whether his death was voluntary, but no one has any doubt that it was opportune.

It would be superfluous to mention those who, although others considered them the happiest among men, expressed their

[15] As tribune, in 91 BC, he proposed a grain law and the granting of Roman citizenship to the other people of the Italian peninsula.

[16] The pretext robe was worn by high-ranking officials and generals, as well as by teenagers until the age of 17, when they received a new outfit, the virile robe.

disgust for every act they performed throughout their years and, with their own lips, gave true testimony against themselves. But, with these complaints, they did not change either themselves or others because, while they expressed their feelings in words, passions made them return to their old habits. Heaven knows! Lives like this, even if they exceed a thousand years, will become a tiny period; their addictions will consume all these years. The space of time that we have – and that reason can prolong – necessarily escapes quickly. You cannot grab it, retain it, nor delay the most fleeting thing in the world, but you allow it to escape as if it was something superfluous and possible to be replaced.

Believe me, it takes a great man, someone who has risen far above human weaknesses, not to allow any of his time to be stolen from him, and it follows that the life of such a man is very long because he devoted entirely to himself all the time he had. He did not neglect his time, nor was he idle.

VII

However, among the worst, I also include those who have no time for anything other than wine and lust, since no one is busy with more shameful things. The others, even if possessed by the vain dream of glory, lose themselves in a decent way. You can mention the greedy, angry men who occupy themselves with hatred and unfair wars. All of them, at least, sin in a more manly way. But those who abandon themselves to the pleasures of the belly[17] and to lust bear a dishonorable stain. See how these people spend their time[18]. See how much of their time they devote to calculations, how much to laying traps, how much to fearing, how much to flattering, how much to being courted, how much time is spent at banquets – because even these have now become a matter of business – and you will see how their interests, whether you call them bad or good, do not give them time to breathe.

Finally, everyone agrees that no success is achieved by a man who is busied with many things – he cannot devote himself to eloquence or liberal studies – since the mind, distracted by divided interests, does not absorb anything deeply but rejects everything that is imposed on it. There is nothing the busy man is less busy with than living; there is nothing harder to learn.

[17] That is, to gluttony.

[18] That is, the several types of occupati that were presented schematically. The looseness of the structure led some editors to doubt the integrity of the passage.

For the other arts, there are many masters everywhere; in some of these arts, we notice that mere boys mastered them so deeply that they could even teach them. A whole life is necessary to learn how to live, and – maybe it makes you think even more – a whole life is necessary to learn how to die. Many great men, having laid aside all their encumbrances, having renounced riches, business, and pleasures, assumed as their only goal, until the end of their lives, to learn how to live. However, most of them left life confessing that they still did not know – and even less learned those of whom I have already spoken. Believe me, it takes a great man, someone who has risen far above human weaknesses, not to allow any of his time to be stolen from him, and it follows that the life of such a man is very long because he devoted entirely to himself all the time he had. He did not neglect his time, nor was he idle. At no time was he under the control of another, because, as a mindful guardian, he found nothing that was worthy to be taken in exchange for his time. So, this man had enough time, but those whose lives were stolen by dealings with the public necessarily had very little of it.

And there is no reason to assume that these people are not aware of their mistakes. Indeed, you will hear many of those who are oppressed by their great prosperity cry out, sometimes amid the crowds of clients, their cases in court, or their other glorious miseries, "I have no chance of living!" Of course he has no chance! All those who call him to themselves take him away from himself. How many days did that defendant steal from him? And this candidate? And that old woman, tired of burying her heirs? And what about that man who pretends sickness for the

[19] That is, she became the prey of inheritance hunters.

purpose of exciting the greed of inheritance hunters? And that very powerful friend who has you and yours on his list, not of friends but of his entourage? Count, I say, and review the days of your life; you will see that very few were left for yourself. That man who prayed for the fasces[20], when he achieves his design, wants to set it aside and asks himself again and again: "When will this year end?" That man sponsors public games[21], and, after placing great value on having the chance to sponsor them, now asks himself: "When will I get rid of this?" This lawyer is celebrated throughout the forum and fills the place with such a large crowd that the back rows cannot hear him, but he is always asking himself: "When will vacation time come?" Everyone rushes through their lives and suffers from the anxiety of the future and the boredom of the present. But the one who dedicates all his time to his own needs, who plans each day as if it was his last, neither longs nor fears tomorrow. Because what new pleasure is there that cannot be a pleasure anymore? All are known; all were enjoyed to the fullest. Mistress Fortune[22] can take care of the rest as she pleases; his life is already assured. Something can be added to him, but nothing is taken from him, and even if he accepts any addition, it will be like feeding a man who, already satisfied and full, accepts food without wanting it. And therefore, there is no reason to think that a man lived long because he has gray hair or wrinkles; he did not live long; he just existed long. Or do you think that made a long journey the man who was caught in a violent storm as soon as he left the port and, thrown from one side to another by a succession

[20] The rods, which were the symbol of high office.

[21] At that time, the management of public games was committed to the praetors.

[22] The goddess Fortuna, of the Romans.

of winds blowing from different directions, was led to sail in circles? He did not travel much; he just moved a lot.

Life will follow the path it started and will not reverse or interrupt its course. It will not make noise, it will not remind you of its quickness. Silently, it will glide. It will not be prolonged by the command of a king or by the applause of the people. Just as it was started, it will run. Nowhere will it stray, nowhere will it delay. And what will be the result? You are busy, and life rushes by.

VIII

I AM OFTEN AMAZED when I see some men demanding the time of others and those from whom they ask it being indulgent. Both consider the time requested as if what is requested was nothing and what is given was also nothing. Men play with the most precious thing in the world, but they are blind to this fact, as it is an incorporeal thing that is not visible, and for this reason, it is considered very cheap – or rather, almost worthless at all. Men assign great importance to pensions and subsidies, and to such things they devote their work, care, and efforts. However, no one values time. Everyone uses it lavishly, as if it costs nothing. See, however, how these same people throw themselves at the feet of physicians if they get sick and the danger of death approaches. See how ready they are, if threatened with the death penalty, to spend all their assets to live! Such is the inconsistency of their feelings. However, if everyone could know the number of their future years, as they know the years that have passed, how alarmed would those who see that they have only a few left be, how jealous of them they would be! And yet, if it is easy to manage what, although little, is certain, one must preserve with great care what one cannot know when it will end.

However, there is no reason for you to suppose that these people do not know how precious time is, for to those whom they love most devotedly they have a habit of saying that they are ready to give them a portion of their own lives. And they

give it without realizing it. However, the result of their giving is that they suffer losses without increasing the years of their loved ones. The only thing they do not know, however, is that they are suffering a loss. Thus, something that is lost without being noticed is bearable. However, no one will bring back lost time, and no one will grant you a second time. Life will follow the path it started and will not reverse or interrupt its course. It will not make noise, and it will not remind you of its quickness. Silently, it will glide. It will not be prolonged by the command of a king or by the applause of the people. Just as it has started, it will run. Nowhere will it stray, nowhere will it delay. And what will be the result? You are busy, and life rushes by. Meanwhile, death approaches for those who, whether they want it or not, will have to surrender.

The poet tells you about a day,
this very day that is passing by.
Is there, then, any doubt that for
unfortunate mortals, that is, for
busy men, the most beautiful day is
the first to escape? Old age surprises
them while their minds are still
childish, and they arrive at it
unprepared and unarmed, as
they did not take measures for it.

IX

CAN THERE BE ANYTHING MORE FOOLISH than certain people who leave prudence aside? They keep themselves very busy in order to live better. They spend their lives getting ready to live! They formulate their purposes with a view to the distant future. However, this postponement is the biggest waste of life, as it deprives them of each day; it steals them of the present by promising something in the future. The greatest obstacle in life is expectation, which makes us rush into tomorrow and miss today. You renounce what depends on Fortune, as well as what depends on you. Where do you look? What goal do you aim for? All things that are yet to come lie uncertain. Live immediately! See how the greatest of bards cries out and, as if inspired by a divine expression, sings the saving song: “The most beautiful day in life is the one that first escapes the unfortunate mortals[23]. Why do you delay?” he asks. “Why are you idle? Unless you seize the day, it slips away." Even if you grab it, it will still run away. Therefore, you must fight the quickness of time with speed, and, like a torrent that will not flow forever, you must drink it quickly. And, also, the statement of the poet is admirably formulated to censor infinite cogitation, as he does not talk about the “most beautiful age," but of the “most beautiful day."

[23] Virgil, Georgics, iii. 66–67..

Why, whatever the size of your greed, do you lengthen what seems slow and sure of time, but which escapes you in such a way into a long series of years and months? The poet tells you about a day, this very day that is passing by. Is there, then, any doubt that for unfortunate mortals, that is, for busy men, the most beautiful day is the first to escape? Old age surprises them while their minds are still childish, and they arrive at it unprepared and unarmed, as they did not take measures for it. They stumbled upon it suddenly and unexpectedly, without realizing that they were getting closer to it day after day. Just as a conversation, reading, or deep meditation about some subject distracts the traveler and it sees that it reached the end of its journey before realizing that it is approaching, so it is with the incessant and fast journey of life; we do it at the same pace, whether awake or asleep, and those who are always busy only realize this at the end.

The present offers only one day at a time, and only for a few moments, but all the days of the past will appear when you order them; they will allow you to contemplate and preserve them at your will – a thing that those who are busy do not have time to do. The undisturbed and quiet mind has the power to wander through all parts of its life, but the minds of the busy ones, as if under the weight of a yoke, cannot turn and look back.

X

IF I CHOSE TO DIVIDE my proposition into arguments and proofs, many of them would occur to me, by which I could prove that busy men find life very short. Fabianus[24], not as a professor, but as a genuine and ancient philosopher, used to say that we must fight against the passions with main force, not with artifices, and that the line of battle must be established aiming at a bold attack rather than to inflict pinpricks. He did not approve of sophistry, for passions must not only be cut off but crushed. Still, so that their victims are not censured, they must be taught and not merely deplored.

Life is divided into three periods: what was, what is, and what will be. Of these, the present time is brief, the future is doubtful, and the past is certain. For the latter is the one over which Fortune lost control; it is the one that cannot be brought back. Busy men admit this because they do not have time to look at the past, and even if they did, they do not like remembering something they see with regret. They are, therefore, unwilling to direct their thoughts back to the hours poorly undertaken, as addictions become obvious if they review the past, even those that were disguised under some seduction of momentary pleasure. They do not have the courage to go back to those hours. No one voluntarily

[24] A much admired teacher of Seneca.

turns its thoughts to the past unless all its actions have been subjected to the censorship of its conscience, which is never deceived. The one who ambitiously coveted, proudly despised, recklessly conquered, treacherously acted, greedily took, or lavishly squandered must fear its own memory. And yet this is the part of our time that is sacred and set apart, placed beyond the reach of all human mishaps and removed from the domain of Fortune, the part that is troubled by no need, by no fear, by no disease. This cannot be disturbed or taken away; it is a perpetual and intrepid possession. The present offers only one day at a time, and only for a few moments, but all the days of the past will appear when you order them; they will allow you to contemplate and preserve them at your will – a thing that those who are busy do not have time to do. The undisturbed and quiet mind has the power to wander through all parts of its life, but the minds of the busy ones, as if under the weight of a yoke, cannot turn and look back. And then their lives disappear into an abyss. And just as it does not matter how much water you pour into a vessel if there is no bottom[25] to receive and hold it, so it is with time – it makes no difference how much is given. If there is nothing to settle down on, it comes out through the cracks and holes of the mind. The present time is very brief, so brief, in fact, that to some there seems to be none. It is always in motion, always flowing and rushing; it ceases to exist before it arrives and cannot tolerate delays more than the firmament or the stars, whose ever-restless movement never lets them remain on the same path. The busy ones, therefore, are concerned only with

[25] An allusion to the fate of the Danaids, who in Hades poured water forever into a vessel with a hole in the bottom.

the present time, and it is so brief that it cannot be seized, and even this is stolen from them, distracted as they are by so many things.

But when, at last, some disease reminds them of their mortality, in what terror do they die, feeling that they are being dragged out of life, and not just leaving it. They cry out that they were fools because they did not really live, and that they will henceforth live in idleness, if only they escape this disease. Then, finally, they reflect on how uselessly they strived for things they did not like and how all their work was in vain.

XI

In a word, do you want to know how they do not "live long"? See how eager they are to live long! Decrepit old men beg in their prayers for a few more years. They pretend they are younger than they are. They comfort themselves with a falsehood and take pleasure in deceiving themselves as if, at the same time, they were deceiving fate. But when, at last, some disease reminds them of their mortality, in what terror do they die, feeling that they are being dragged out of life, and not just leaving it. They cry out that they were fools because they did not really live, and that they will henceforth live in idleness, if only they escape this disease. Then, finally, they reflect on how uselessly they strived for things they did not like and how all their work was in vain. However, for those whose lives are far from all business, why should they not be extensive? None of this is assigned to another; nothing goes in this direction and, as nothing is committed to Fortune, nothing perishes by negligence, nothing is taken away by wasted donations, and nothing is unusable. All this, so to speak, generates income. And so, however small the amount may be, it is abundantly enough, and therefore, whenever his last day comes, the wise man will not hesitate to meet death with a steady step.

And such is the multitude of unbelievable addictions that emerged in this age – so creative in this – that we can accuse pampering of negligence. And to think that there are those who are so lost in luxury that they need someone else's word to know whether they are sitting or not! This man, then, is not idle. You must give him a different name – he is sick; no, in fact, he is half dead. The man who knows his leisure is idle.

XII

MAYBE YOU ASK who I call "the busy ones"? There is no reason to suppose that I am referring just to those who only leave the court when the dogs[26] are let loose, or to those whom you see being gloriously crushed by their own retinue or, contemptuously, by someone else's, nor to those whom the social duties take them from their homes to knock on another's door, or whom the praetor's[27] spear keeps busy due to a cause in trial. Even the leisure of some men is busy. In their village or on their couch, in the midst of solitude, although they have withdrawn from everyone else, they themselves are the source of their misfortunes. We should say that these are not living in leisure but in busy idleness. Would you say that the man who carefully arranges his Corinthian bronzes, which cost him and consume him most of the day, as he spends it polishing rusty blades, is idle? Who sits in the place where the young men anoint themselves with oil (for, to our shame, we have addictions that are not even Roman!) to watch them fight? Who divides their flock of mules by age and color? Who sponsors new athletes? Answer me, would you say that those men who spend many hours at the barbershop to be stripped of whatever grew the night before are idle? While a solemn debate is held over every hair? While the

[26] Apparently, guard dogs that were let in at dusk and caught the lawyer still focused on his task.

[27] Literally, "spear," which was stuck in the ground as a sign of a public auction where captured or confiscated goods were put up for sale.

messy locks are restored to their places or arranged on this side or that, whichever is thinner? How angry they are if the barber is careless, as if he was cutting a real man! How they flare up if part of their hair is cut off, or if something is out of order, if the hairstyle does not have identical curls! Who of these would not prefer to see the state in disarray, but not their hair? Who of these is not more concerned with the elegance of their trimmed heads than with their health? Who of these would not prefer to be clean-shaven rather than fair? Would you say that those who occupy themselves with the comb and the mirror are the idle ones? And what about those who are committed to composing, listening, and learning songs while distorting the voice, which nature made great and simple, into the meanders of some indolent melody? Those who are always snapping their fingers while keeping the beat to some song they have in their heads, who even when called upon to discuss serious and often even melancholy matters, are heard humming a song? These have no leisure, but idle occupations. And their feasts? Heaven knows! I cannot count them as hours of leisure because I see how anxiously they organize their silverware, how diligently they tie the tunics of their beautiful slaves, how anxiously they look to see how the cook is preparing the boar, how quickly, at a given signal, beardless-faced slaves rush to fulfill their duties, how skillfully the birds are carved into portions, all according to the rule; how carefully the unfortunate boys clean up the drunkards' vomit. By such means, they seek the reputation of being luxurious and elegant, and their ills accompany them throughout their lives, since they cannot eat or drink without ostentation. And I would not count among the idle those men who go from one place to another in carriages and litters and who are punctual at the times of their rides as if it was illegal to omit them; nor those who have to be reminded by others when to bathe, swim, and have dinner.

They are so weakened by the excessive lassitude of a spoiled spirit that they cannot discover for themselves whether they are hungry! I heard that one of these men – if you can call a man the one who unlearned the simplest habits of human life –, when being taken out of the bathtub by several hands and placed in his litter, asked, "Am I sitting now?" Do you think that this man, who does not know if he is sitting, if he is alive, if he is seeing, or if he is resting, is idle? I think it is hard to say whether I feel more sorry for the one who really does not know or the one who pretends not to know. Many are actually subject to forgetting several things; others pretend not to know. Some addictions seduce them as if they were proof of their prosperity. It seems inferior and despicable to them to know what they are doing. Do not imagine that mimes[28] exaggerate when they invent farces to mock luxury! In fact, they ignore more than they invent. And such is the multitude of unbelievable addictions that emerged in this age – so creative in this – that we can accuse pampering of negligence. And to think that there are those who are so lost in luxury that they need someone else's word to know whether they are sitting or not! This man, then, is not idle. You must give him a different name – he is sick; no, in fact, he is half dead. The man who knows his leisure is idle. But this other who is half alive, who, in order to know the position of his own body, needs someone to tell him – how can he own any part of his time?

[28] Actors of mimes, or vulgar farces, which were often censored for their indecencies. They should not be confused with mimics.

But does it serve any useful purpose to know that Pompey was the first to promote the slaughter of eighteen circus elephants, setting criminals against them in a battle? He, a leader of the state who, according to reports, stood out among the ancient leaders for the kindness of his heart, considered it a remarkable spectacle to kill human beings in a new way.

XIII

It would be tedious to mention all those who spent their entire lives playing chess or ball, or tanning their bodies in the sun. Those whose pleasures require many activities do not enjoy idleness. No one will have the slightest doubt that they get tired without doing anything, like, for example, those who waste their time on useless literary problems, of which, even among the Romans, there are now a great number. It was already a weakness of the Greeks to ask how many rowers Ulysses had, whether the Iliad or the Odyssey was written first, whether, in addition, they belong to the same author, and several other matters of that nature, which, if you keep them to yourself, will in no way please your secret soul, and if you make them public, you will cause yourself to be considered boring rather than wise. But now this vain passion for learning useless things has also attacked the Romans. One of those days, I heard someone tell me who was the first Roman general to do this or that. He said that Duilius was the first to win a naval battle and that Curius Dentatus was the first to take elephants in his triumphal procession. Still, these issues, even if they do not lead to true glory, demonstrate civic achievements. Such knowledge does not bring any benefit; however, it draws our attention because of the attractiveness of the feat. We must also forgive those who investigate similar matters: who first convinced the Romans to board a ship? It

was Claudius, and for this reason, he received the surname Caudex, because among the ancients, a structure formed by the union of several tables was called caudex; hence, the Tablets of the Law were also called codices[29], and, in the old fashion, the boats that transport provisions along the Tiber River are still called codicariae. Without a doubt, this may also have some value, that is, the fact that Valerius Corvinus was the first to conquer Messana[30] and was the first of the family of the Valerii to adopt the surname Messana, as he took the same name of the conquered city for himself and was later called Messala, after the gradual corruption of the name in the popular speech. Maybe you allow someone to be interested in this also: the fact that Lucius Sulla was the first to exhibit loosed lions in the circus, since they were previously exhibited in chains, and that archers were sent by King Bocchus to exterminate them? Without a doubt, we can make this concession. But does it serve any useful purpose to know that Pompey was the first to promote the slaughter of eighteen circus elephants, setting criminals against them in a battle? He, a leader of the state who, according to reports, stood out among the ancient leaders[31] for the kindness of his heart, considered it a remarkable spectacle to kill human beings in a new way. Do they fight to the death? This is not enough! Are they torn into pieces? This is not enough! Let them be crushed by animals of monstrous size! It would be better that these things fell into oblivion, to prevent some all-

[29] The ancient codex was made of tablets of wood fastened together.

[30] Modern Messina, Sicily.

[31] Without a doubt, just like Marius, Sulla, Caesar, Crassus.

powerful man from learning about them and envying such an inhuman act[32]. Oh, what blindness great prosperity cast upon our minds! When he threw a bunch of wretches against beasts born under a different sky, when he caused a war between creatures so dissimilar, when he caused so much blood to be spilled before the eyes of the Roman people that itself was soon to be forced to shed more, he then believed he was beyond the power of nature. Later, however, this same man[33], betrayed by Alexandrian disloyalty, offered himself to the dagger of the vilest slave and, finally, discovered what an empty boast the ostentation of his surname was[34].

But returning to the point from which I have digressed, and to show that some people devote useless efforts to these same matters, the man I mentioned reported that Metellus, during his triumphal procession, after his victory over the Carthaginians in Sicily, was the only one of all the Romans who had one hundred and twenty captured elephants driven in front of his chariot; that Sulla was the last of the Romans to extend the pomerium[35], which in old times was customary to do after the conquest of Italian territories, but never provincial ones. Is it more advantageous to know that Mount Aventine, according to him, was outside the pomerium for

[32] Pliny (Nat. Hist. viii. 21) reports that the people were so moved by pity that they rose in a body and shouted curses at Pompey. Cicero's impressions of the occasion are recorded in Ad Fam. vii. 1. 3: "extremus elephantorum dies fuit, in quo admiratio magna vulgi atque turbae, delectatio nulla exstitit; quin etiam misericordia quaedam consecuta est atque opinio eiusmodi, esse quandam illi beluae cum genere humana societatem" (it was the last day of the elephants, in which there was no joy in the great admiration of the people and the crowd; indeed, he also aroused pity and the opinion that he was rude and inhuman).

[33] Pompey.

[34] That is, Magnus.

[35] A name applied to a consecrated space kept vacant within and (according to Titus Livius, i. 44) without the city wall. The right to extend it originally belonged to the king who had added territory to Rome.

two reasons, namely, either because it was the place from which the commoners moved away or because the flight of birds was not favorable when Remus took his auspices in that place – and, in turn, countless other reports that are full of falsehoods or are of the same sort? For although you agree that they tell such things in good faith and commit themselves to the truth of what they write, still, whose mistakes will be mitigated by such stories? Whose passions will they restrain? Who will they make braver, fairer, and nobler? My friend Fabianus used to say that sometimes he doubted whether it was better not to dedicate himself to any study than to get caught up in it.

How many will there be whose
sleepiness, self-condescension,
and rudeness will drive them away!
How many, after torturing them
with a long wait, will rush by, pretending
to be in a hurry! How many will avoid
passing through a corridor full of clients
and escape through some hidden door,
as if it was no more impolite to
deceive than to dismiss?

XIV

Of all men, only those who dedicate their time to philosophy are at leisure. Only they really live, as they are not content with being good guardians of their own lives. They add each era to its own age; all the years that passed before them are added to theirs. Unless we are ungrateful, all these men, glorious formers of sacred thoughts, were born for us; for us, they prepared a way of life. Through the works of other men, we are led to visions of the most beautiful things, plucked out of darkness and brought into the light. We are excluded from no century; we have access to everyone; and if it is our wish, by greatness of spirit, to surpass the narrow limits of human weakness, there is a great space of time in which we can wander. We can argue with Socrates, doubt[36] with Carneades, find peace with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, surpass it with the Cynics. Since nature allows us to commune with all ages, why should we not leave this insignificant and fleeting passage of time and surrender with all our souls to the past, which is unlimited, which is eternal, which we share with superior men?

Those who rush to perform their social duties, who do not give rest to themselves or others, when they give themselves over completely to their madness, when every day they cross

[36] The New Academy taught that certainty of knowledge was unattainable.

everyone's threshold and do not fail to visit any door open, when they take their mercenary greeting to the most distant houses – they will have seen very little in a city so large and torn apart by such varied desires. How many will there be whose sleepiness, self-condescension, and rudeness will drive them away! How many, after torturing them with a long wait, will rush by, pretending to be in a hurry! How many will avoid passing through a corridor full of clients and escape through some hidden door, as if it was no more impolite to deceive than to dismiss? How many, still half-asleep and lazy from last night's debauch, barely lifting their lips in an insolent yawn, manage to respond to the poor wretches who interrupt their own sleep[37] to wait while they continue to sleep?

But we can fairly say that those who are engaged in the true duties of life are only those who, every day, wish to have Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus, Aristotle, Theophrastus, and all the other high priests of liberal studies as their close friends. None of them will be missing, none of them will fail to make their visitor leave happier and more dedicated to himself than when he entered, none of them will allow anyone to leave them empty-handed. All mortals can be with them at night or during the day.

[37] The salutatio, when clients came to greet their patron, was held early in the morning.

This is the only way to prolong life – or rather, to transform it into immortality. Honors, monuments, all that ambition ordered by decrees or erected in works of stone quickly turn into ruin. There is nothing that the lapse of time does not destroy and annihilate. But the works that Philosophy consecrated cannot be ruined by time. No age will destroy or diminish them.

XV

NONE OF THEM WILL LEAD YOU to death, but all of them will teach you how to die. None of the will waste your years, but each will add his own years to yours. Conversations with them will never bring you danger, nor will their friendship endanger your life, nor will their company burden your purse. From them, you will get whatever you want. It will not be their fault if you do not extract as much as you can. What happiness and what a beautiful old age await the one who offered himself as a client to these men! He will have friends from whom he can ask advice on major and minor matters, from whom he can consult every day about himself, from whom he can hear the truth without being insulted, or praised without being flattered, and from whom he can mold himself in his likeness.

We often say that it was not in our power to choose the parents that Fortune gave us; that they were given to men by chance. However, we can have a birth according to our choice[38]. There are families of the noblest intellect. Choose the one you want to be adopted into. You will inherit not only their name but even their property, which there will be no need to guard with a miserable or petty spirit, for the more it is shared,

[38] It refers to the Roman custom of adoption, but suggests that Paulinus chooses to be "adopted" by some philosopher or philosophical school.

the greater it will become. This will open for you the path to immortality and will raise you to a height from which no one is in danger of falling. This is the only way to prolong life – or rather, to transform it into immortality. Honors, monuments, all that ambition ordered by decrees or erected in works of stone quickly turn into ruin. There is nothing that the lapse of time does not destroy and annihilate. But the works that Philosophy consecrated cannot be ruined by time. No age will destroy or diminish them. The next age and the ones that follow will only increase reverence for them, since envy acts only on what is near, and we have more freedom to admire things that are far away. The life of the philosopher, therefore, has a broad spectrum, and he is not confined by the same limits as others. Only he is free from the limitations of the human race. All ages serve him as a god. Is something lost in time? He recovers through memory. Is it in the present? He takes advantage. Yet to come? He anticipates. He extends his life by combining all times into one.

In their madness, they are tormented by wavering emotions that drive them exactly toward the things they fear. They often pray for death because they fear it. And, also, you have no reason to think that this constitutes proof that they are living longer – the fact that the day often seems long to them or that they complain that the hours until dinner pass slowly – because whenever their occupations are missing, they are restless when they are left with nothing to do and do not know how to spend their leisure time or make the most of their time.

XVI

UT THOSE WHO FORGET the past, neglect the present, and fear the future have a very short and troubled life. When they reach their end, the poor wretches realize too late that, for a long time, they were busy doing nothing. Nor, because they sometimes invoke death, should you think this is proof that they have had a long existence. In their madness, they are tormented by wavering emotions that drive them exactly toward the things they fear. They often pray for death because they fear it. And, also, you have no reason to think that this constitutes proof that they are living longer – the fact that the day often seems long to them or that they complain that the hours until dinner pass slowly – because whenever their occupations are missing, they are restless when they are left with nothing to do and do not know how to spend their leisure time or make the most of their time. In this way, they strive to occupy themselves with something, and the time between one task and another is boring for them. It is exactly like they do when a gladiatorial exhibition is announced or when they are expecting some other spectacle or entertainment: they want to skip the days that precede the event. Every wait is painful for them. However, the moment they want is brief and quick, becoming much shorter by their own fault as they flee from one pleasure to another without remaining fixed on just one desire. Their days are not long, but hateful. On the other hand, how short seem to them the

nights they spend in the arms of some prostitute or given over to wine! This also explains the madness of poets, who encourage human errors with stories in which they represent Jupiter, dominated by carnal desire, doubling the length of the night[39]. For what is it but to inflame our addictions to have the gods as their sponsors and to excuse our own weakness by the example of divinity? Can the nights they pay so much for stop seeming too short for these men? They waste the day waiting for the night, and the night, afraid of the dawn.

[39] Jupiter made the night last twice as long so he could better enjoy Alcmene's company.

In fact, everything that comes from chance is unstable, and the higher it rises, the more likely it is to fall. Furthermore, what is doomed to perish brings pleasure. Very wretched, therefore, – and not just short – must be the life of those who work hard to earn what they need and strive even harder to keep it. With great effort, they achieve what they want, and with anxiety, they retain what they achieved. Meanwhile, they do not take into account the time that will never come back.

XVII

THE PLEASURES OF SUCH MEN are restless and shaken by afflictions of several types, and even in moments of great joy, distressing thoughts come to them: "How long will this last?" This feeling led kings to regret the power they possessed, nor the greatness of their fate comforted them, but they saw with terror the end of their fortune. When the king of Persia[40], with all the insolence that emerged from his pride, placed his army on the vast plains without being able to measure its number, only to understand its size by the area it occupied[41], he shed copious tears because, in a hundred years, no man from that powerful army would be alive[42]. But those for whom he wept, he would himself make them perish, some on the sea, some on the land, some in battle, some in escape, and in a short time he would destroy all those for whose hundredth year he so feared. And why is it that even their joys are filled with anxiety? Because they are not based on stable foundations but are disturbed by the same uselessness that gives rise to them. However, what do you think are the miserable moments in the lives of such kings, since even the joys by which they are exalted and elevated above humanity

[40] Xerxes, who invaded Greece in 480 BC.

[41] On the plain of Doriscus in Thrace the huge land force was estimated by counting the number of times a space capable of holding 10,000 men was filled (Herodotus, vii. 60).

[42] Herodotus, vii. 45, 46.

do not in any way offer them pure happiness? All the greatest blessings are a source of anxiety, and at no time fortune is reliable. To maintain prosperity, there is a need for other prosperity, and for the sake of the prayers that were answered, we must pray still more. In fact, everything that comes from chance is unstable, and the higher it rises, the more likely it is to fall. Furthermore, what is doomed to perish brings pleasure. Very wretched, therefore, – and not just short – must be the life of those who work hard to earn what they need and strive even harder to keep it. With great effort, they achieve what they want, and with anxiety, they retain what they achieved. Meanwhile, they do not take into account the time that will never come back. New concerns take the place of old ones; hope achieved gives birth to new hope; ambition, to a new ambition. They do not seek an end to their misery but change its cause. Have we been tormented by our public positions? Other people's affairs take our time more than anything else. Do we want to work as candidates? We start as voters. Have we gotten rid of the painful role of the prosecutor? We become judges. Has a man ceased to be a judge? He becomes a praetor. Did he grow old managing other people's property in exchange for a salary? He gets busy taking care of his own wealth. Did the army[43] release Marius? The consulship takes over. Is Quintius[44] in a hurry to abandon the dictatorship? He will be called back from the plow[45]. Scipio will go against the Carthaginians before he is even ripe for such a great undertaking; victorious over Hannibal and Antiochus,

[43] In the original, Caliga is the boot of the common soldier, but here is used as a synonym for military service.

[44] Years after his dictatorship, Quintius was summoned again.

[45] His first appointment was announced to him while he was ploughing his own fields.

the glory of his own consulship, guarantee of that of his brother[46], if he himself had not prevented it, would be placed next to Jove[47]. However, the discord of the civilians will turn against their savior, and, having in his youth refused honors that made him equal to the gods, finally, as an old man, his ambition would only be the delight of a peaceful exile[48]. There will never be a lack of reasons for anxiety, whether born of prosperity or misery. Life progresses through a succession of involvements. We will always pray for leisure but never enjoy it.

[46] Lucius.

[47] He did not allow his statue to be placed in the Capitol.

[48] Disgusted with politics, he died in exile.

There will be no shortage of worthy men who are much more capable of carrying weight. Heavy oxen are much more suited to carrying heavy loads than thoroughbred horses, and who ever oppressed the agility of such noble creatures with a heavy load? Consider, furthermore, how much worry such a painful burden can cause. Your occupations will be with the belly of man. Hungry people do not listen to reason, nor is appeased by justice, nor is bent by any supplication.

XVIII

AND SO, my dear Paulinus, move away from the crowd and, already quite tired for the duration of your life, withdraw to a peaceful port. Think about how many troubles you overcame, how many storms you faced, on the one hand, in your private life, and, on the other, in your public life. For a long time, your virtue has been demonstrated through laborious and incessant proofs. Try your virtue in leisure now. Most of your life, and certainly the best part, was dedicated to the state. Now, also dedicate part of your time to yourself. And I am not inviting you to inertia or laziness, or to drown your vigor in sleep, nor in the pleasures that are dear to the crowd. This is not the rest. You will find much greater work than all you performed with so much energy until now to occupy you in the midst of your retirement and without worries. You, I know, manage the affairs of the world as honestly as those of others, as carefully as you would your own, as conscientiously as you would those of the state. You receive affection in a job where it is difficult to avoid hatred; however, believe me, it is better to have knowledge of your own life than of the grain stockpile[49]. Devote your discerning mind, which is the most competent to deal with the greatest subjects, to a truly honorable service

[49] Here, Paulinus' occupation becomes clear, cf. Note 1.

but little prepared for a happy life, and reflect that throughout your training in liberal studies, which begins in your early years, you were not instructed to deal with the amount of wheat grains. You aspired to greater and higher things. There will be no shortage of worthy men who are much more capable of carrying weight. Heavy oxen are much more suited to carrying heavy loads than thoroughbred horses, and who ever oppressed the agility of such noble creatures with a heavy load? Consider, furthermore, how much worry such a painful burden can cause. Your occupations will be with the belly of man. Hungry people do not listen to reason, nor is appeased by justice, nor is bent by any supplication. Very recently, a few days after the death of Gaius Caesar,[50] – still suffering greatly (if the dead have any feelings) because he knew that the Roman people had survived him[51] and had enough food to last at least seven or eight days, while he was building his bridge of ships[52] and playing with the resources of the empire, we were threatened with the worst evil that can befall men even during a siege – there was a lack of provisions. His imitation of a mad, foreign, and dishonest[53] king nearly cost the city destruction, famine, and the general disorder that follows famine. What must have been the feeling of those who were in charge of the grain supply and had to face the stones, the sword, the fire – and Caligula's fury? With the greatest dissimulation, they hid the great evil lodged in the vital organs of the state – and with

[50] Caligula.

[51] Probably an allusion to Caligula's mad desire. Previous editors point out that the logic of the entire passage suffers from the uncertainty of the text.

[52] About 5.6 km (three and a half miles) long.

[53] Xerxes, who built a bridge over the Hellespont to invade Greece.

good reasons, you can be sure. In effect, certain diseases must be treated while the patient ignores them. The knowledge of its evil has caused the death of many.

What fate awaits your soul? Where does nature lay us to rest when we are released from the body? What is the principle that supports the heaviest matter in the center of this world, which suspends the lightest, carries fire to the upper regions, sets the stars in their rotation, and other wonderful phenomena? You must, indeed, leave the earth and turn your mind to these things!

XIX

SEEK REFUGE in the quietest, safest, and highest things! Do you think it is the same thing to be worried about the wheat from overseas reaching the barns undamaged, free from fraud or negligence on the part of those who transport it, ensuring that it is stored appropriately so that it is not exposed to heat or spoiled by humidity, and, finally, that the weight and size are as expected[54], or dedicate yourself to those sacred and elevated studies that will reveal the substance, the pleasure, the condition, the shape of God? What fate awaits your soul? Where does nature lay us to rest when we are released from the body? What is the principle that supports the heaviest matter in the center of this world, which suspends the lightest, carries fire to the upper regions, sets the stars in their rotation, and other wonderful phenomena? You must, indeed, leave the earth and turn your mind to these things! Now, while the blood is hot, we must walk with quick steps in the best course. In this kind of life, you will find what is good to know – the love and practice of virtues, the forgetfulness of passions, the knowledge of life and death, and a life of deep rest.

The condition of all who are busy is miserable, but more miserable is the condition of those who work in occupations

[54] Again, Seneca alludes to the position of Paulinus.

that are not even theirs, who regulate their sleep by someone else's, their walk by someone else's pace, who are under their orders in the freest things in the world – loving and hating. If these want to know how short their lives are, let them reflect on how small a part of it is their own.

Shameful is the one whose breath leaves him in the midst of a trial when, already advanced in years and still courting the applause of a circle of ignorant people, he defends the vile cause of some litigant. Shameful is the one who, exhausted more by his way of living than by his work, succumbs in the midst of his own duties. Shameful is the one who, when he dies, gets a smile from the heir he made wait a long time

XX

And so, when you often see a man dressed in the robe of an office or when you hear a famous name in the Forum, do not envy him. Such things are bought at the price of life itself. They will consume all their years so that only one year is given to them[55]. Life abandoned some in their first struggles before they could reach the height of their ambition. Others, upon submitting themselves to a thousand indignities until reaching the supreme position, are possessed by the unfortunate thought that they only toiled so much for a vain inscription on the tomb. Some, who reached extreme old age while cherishing new hopes as if they were still in their youth, succumb to weakness in the midst of their great and anxious efforts. Shameful is the one whose breath leaves him in the midst of a trial when, already advanced in years and still courting the applause of a circle of ignorant people, he defends the vile cause of some litigant. Shameful is the one who, exhausted more by his way of living than by his work, succumbs in the midst of his own duties. Shameful is the one who, when he dies, gets a smile from the heir he made wait a long time[56].

I cannot ignore an example that occurs to me. Sextus

[55] The Roman year was dated by the names of the two annual consuls.

[56] That is, long kept out of his inheritance.

Turannius was an elderly and very diligent man who, after his ninetieth year, having been discharged of the duties of his office by an act of Gaius Caesar himself, ordered him to be placed in his bed and mourned by the gathered family as if he was dead. The whole house lamented the idleness of its old master, and the mourning did not cease until his position was restored to him. Is it really so pleasant to die busy? However, many have the same feeling. Their desire for work is greater than their ability. They fight against the weakness of their bodies, and they deplore old age only because it takes them away from business. After the age of fifty, the law exempts one from military service, nor does it call for a senator after the age of sixty. It is more difficult for men to grant rest to themselves than for the law. Meanwhile, while they steal and are stolen, while they interrupt one another's rest, while they make one another miserable, their lives are without profit, without pleasure, without any progress of spirit. No one has death before their eyes; everyone has far-reaching hopes. Some men, in fact, even organize things beyond their lifetimes – huge mausoleums, the dedications of public services, funeral games, and glorious obsequies. But, in truth, the funerals of such men should be conducted by the light of torches and wax candles[57], as if they had lived a very short time.

[57] That is, as if they were children, whose funerals took place at night.

Camelot
EDITORA

SENECA
ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

One of Seneca's most well-known works is also a moral essay that brings powerful reflections on death, human nature, and the art of living. Regarded as one of the most renowned texts of Stoic philosophy, it was structured in the form of letters addressed to Paulinus and gathers, briefly and assertively, the ideas and inquiries of one of the most celebrated intellectuals of his time in an incessant quest to live life in the best possible way. Its principles of wisdom, though written over two thousand years ago, continue to provide great lessons to this day.

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